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Brief Studies

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BRIEF STUDIES

AN INTERPRETATION OF JOSHUA 10:12-14

This passage has been studied by exegetes, ancient and modern, by naturalists and astronomers, but no explanation has proved satisfactory to all. Men have called it allegory or legend, or if they took the words literally, have sought some explanation to fit their frameworks of thought.

Under the title "What Does 'The Sun Stood Still' Mean?" Robert Dick Wilson offered an interpretation forty years ago in the *Princeton Theological Review* (XVI [1918], 46—54). This article still merits consideration.

He points out that several key words that occur in this passage do not have their ordinary meaning but like their Assyro-Babylonian cognates are used as technical terms to denote phenomena in the science of astronomy. It is clear from inscriptions that they were a part of a definite astronomical vocabulary in Babylonia. It also appears that the Septuagint translators still were aware of their scientific connotation. In the course of time however, this special meaning was lost. The words that come under consideration are עָמַד, דָּמָה, and עָמַד.

דָּמָה in Hebrew means "to be silent, to be dumb." As it is used in this section of Joshua, it seems to have the meaning "to stand still," as both the Revised Standard Version and the Authorized Version translate it. However, the root of the word *dm* is the same as the word *da'amu* in Akkadian, which is synonymous with the words *adiru* and *atalu*. *Atalu* was used in the astronomical tables for "eclipse" of the sun, and the verb *adaru* meant "to be dark." In works on Babylonian astronomy the root *dm* is used frequently. Where the sun and moon are involved ". . . both are said to be darkened together, the word for darkening being *dm*" (p. 47). So instead of translating as "stand still" he would give it as "be dark, be eclipsed."

עָמַד, "to stand"

. . . occurs frequently on the tablets to denote the point, or place, in the heavens at which a star ceases to go in one direction and begins its return journey to its starting point. To the naked eye a star seems to "stand still" for a time before starting on its return passage, just as a runner in a race up and down a lane would stand still as he was turning to run back to the starting point. In a second sense the verb is used for the "staying" of a star in a constellation, or house, of the zodiac. [Pages 46, 47]

עָמַד frequently means "midst" in Hebrew, but in the two places where it is used in the Babylonian astronomical tablets

. . . it has the sense more usual in Hebrew of "half," being employed in one case to denote the half of a cloud and in the other the half of the moon. According to this interpretation, it would mean in Joshua the period from midday to sunset, or ninety degrees. [Page 47]

The phrase **כִּי־יָמִים**, "about a whole day," is also considered. He allows the possible translation of "about" for the preposition *kaf* but argues that it is not used in this sense with **כִּי** elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. He cites Ps. 90:4 and Amos 8:10 as places where it means "as," and he notes especially 1 Sam. 18:10; Hos. 2:5, 17; Lam. 2:7, 22; Zech. 14:3; Is. 9:3; Ezek. 30:9, and Ps. 95:8 as meaning "as on a [or the] day."

בְּיָמֵי, which follows **כִּי־יָמִים** and which is translated "whole,"

. . . usually means "without blemish." If so used here, it would suggest that an eclipse was looked upon as a blemish to a perfect day, just as mists and blizzards are by us. It is more probable, however, that it means ended, or completed, or "done" in the sense in which Longfellow employs it in the lines

"The day is done, and the darkness
Falls from the wing of night." [Page 53]

Wilson cites Jer. 1:3; Gen. 47:18; and Deut. 34:8 as support for this sense of the word and comments: "Applied to the passage before us, the whole statement would mean that the sun kept on shining in the half of the heavens and hastened not to go in as when a day is done" (p. 53). So he would translate **כִּי־יָמִים** "as on a completed [or ordinary] day."

אֶרְבָּו, Wilson says, is ". . . rendered here in the Septuagint by προπορεύω, 'to go forward,' thus corresponding to the Babylonian *etēku*. . ." "For the 'coming out' in the morning, both Hebrew and Babylonian use the word *yāçā* (Bab. *āçū*)."

One more word is brought under scrutiny by Dr. Wilson—the verb **אֶרְבָּו**. He notes that Hebrew uses it for the "going in" of the sun in the evening and that **אֶרְבָּו** was used for the "coming out" of the sun in the morning.

The Babylonian uses the same word for the "coming out" of the sun, but uses *erēbu* (from which the Hebrew derives "ereb," its term for evening) to denote the "going in," at sunset. With this in mind, we can understand what Ben Sira means when he says that through Joshua the sun stood, one day becoming like two. He means apparently that the day of the battle had two *comings out* of the sun, one at sunrise and the other at midday, when it came out from behind the moon; and that it had two *goings in*, one when it went in behind the moon and the other at sunset. [Page 47]

One of the important effects of the eclipse was the impression it

made upon the enemies of Israel. Not only did they suffer from storm and hail (v. 11), but now their gods suffered disgrace in that the eclipse darkened both the sun and the moon, their chief deities. Even up to fairly recent times an eclipse has been known to strike dread in men. It is quite likely that this gave them a premonition of the end of all things.

In offering this interpretation, Wilson admits that it does away with the miraculous character of the event, but only insofar as it affects the earth's physical relationship with the other bodies of the universe. (The fact that Wilson devoted his scholarship to combatting the claims of negative higher criticism testifies to his acceptance of the miraculous events of the Scriptures.) He also admits that this interpretation does not accord with Jewish exegesis of the ancient versions, except perhaps the Septuagint, which he regards as ambiguous and hard to interpret. He offers two reasons for the literal interpretation of the Jews: first of all, they wanted to enhance their own importance in the universe; secondly, they were ignorant of the root meanings of the words.

His translation is as follows:

Be eclipsed, O sun, in Gibeon,

And thou, moon in the valley of Ajalon!

And the sun was eclipsed and the moon turned back, while the nation was avenged on its enemies. Is it not written upon the book of Jashar?

And the sun stayed in the half of the heavens,

and set not hastily as when a day is done.

And there never was a day like that before or since, in respect to Jehovah's hearing the voice of a man. [Pages 49, 50]

A note by Henry N. Russell of the Princeton University Observatory in the same volume (p. 103) makes this comment on Wilson's interpretation:

It appears highly probable from the astronomical standpoint. . . . Oppolzer's *Canon der Finsternisse*, which gives exact details concerning the times and places of visibility of all eclipses since the year 1208 B. C. is not available for earlier times. It is, however, of interest to note that, between this date and the Christian Era, there were seven solar eclipses which were total, or very near so, in Southern Palestine. The earliest of them, on September 30, B. C. 1131 was total shortly after noon in almost exactly the region of Joshua's battle. It seems quite probable therefore from the scientific standpoint that there may have been an eclipse in the same region several centuries earlier, which would satisfy all the conditions.

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